THE PAIN OF THIS WORLD

By P. G. WALSH

'WITHOUT any doubt, the mystery of our religion is very deep indeed' (1 Tim 3,16). Paul is referring to the mystery of Christ's incarnation and ascension into glory, and he is exploiting this hymn as instruction in catechetics. 'The point of all our toiling and battling is that we have put our trust in the living God, and he is the saviour of the whole human race, but particularly of believers. This is what you are to enforce in your teaching' (1 Tim 4,10-11). The depth and imponderability of the mystery is nowhere so evident as in the phenomenon of human suffering.

Paul was emphatic that his mission was to preach the good news, but not 'in terms of the philosophy in which the crucifixion of Christ cannot be expressed' (1 Cor 1,17). Yet in the first century, as in succeeding centuries, the teaching recommended by Paul had to be addressed to an audience rightly suspicious of instant saviours. If the sweeping pauline claims were to be accepted as a satisfying rationale of our life on earth, they had to be underpinned by a perennial philosophy which could explain — or if not explain, help men to accept — the hard problems of human living. Hence the series of christian apologies in the Fathers, which culminate with Augustine's *City of God*, concern themselves with much more than the preaching of Christ's living presence in the world. Augustine has to enunciate his christian vision in the uncomfortable climate of a Rome lately humbled by the barbarian; he begins his defence not by evangelical proclamation but by grasping the nettle of recent famine, torture and death.

So begins a long tradition of christian witness based on that combination of rational enquiry and revealed truth which is dignified with the label of christian humanism. This double approach to the problems of living in the world develops most notably in the schools of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when

biblical and secular spokesmen each have their authoritative status as guardians of revelation and reason respectively. St Thomas is rarely content with citation of biblical and patristic teaching, but seeks support for his theological positions from Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca as well.

Such patient reconciliation of received truth and rational analysis can be epitomized in the words of the late T. S. Gregory as 'Trying to understand everything God means by everything he does'. It lies at the root of much of the contemporary liberation-theology; and a manful attempt was made to employ it as a controlling methodology at the recent bishops' synod on marriage and the family, when the 'inductive' principles of the anthropological approach were measured against the 'deductive' norms of the traditional teaching.

The problem of human suffering has traditionally been the sticking-point for many sympathetic enquirers into the truth of christian claims, and our age of instantaneous pictorial reporting focuses the issue starkly. Can we 'put our trust in the living God . . . the saviour of the whole human race' as we contemplate in rapid succession the dazed victims of Caribbean typhoons, the emaciated children doomed to die in Uganda, the corpses of italian worshippers killed at the Sunday liturgy by earth-tremors? Or, to pass from such communal suffering to the ordeals of individuals, what are we to reply to the mother of a Jacqueline Hill, Sunday-school teacher and victim of a 'Ripper' murder in Leeds, when she says 'It seems so unfair'? Or to the old lady of eighty who stumbles, has a cerebral hemorrhage, loses her sight, and sits forlornly asking 'What shall I do now?' Or to the mother of the deformed baby, unable to work her way through to acceptance of her changed life?

Thomas Blackburn's poem, *Hospital for defectives*, depicts four patients at work in the vegetable-garden, and asks the inevitable question:

> . . . and two men pick the turnips up
> and two men pull the cart;
> and yet between the four of them
> no word is ever said,
> because the yeast was not put in
> which makes the human bread.
> But three men stare on vacancy
> and one man strokes his knees;
> what is the meaning to be found
> in such dark vowels as these?

Lord of the images, whose love
the eyelid and the rose
takes for a metaphor, today
beneath the warder's blows
the unleavened man did not cry out
or turn his face away.
Through such men in a turnip-field
what is it that you say?

The traditional 'deductive' teaching is that suffering is to be accepted as an indispensable part of the Christian's life. It exists as a result of Adam's fall and the presence of Satan in the world. The classic exposition of this teaching lies in the drama of the book of Job; God allows Satan to play havoc with the family and possessions of one 'perfect and upright, that feared God and eschewed evil'. Suffering is an integral part of the witness of the prophets down to John the Baptist; Christ renews the message when he emphasizes that following him entails the taking up of the cross.

Scripture offers two reasons within the design of providence for the existence of suffering. First, it can be a testing and a training, a discipline imposed by a loving father. 'My son, do not scorn correction from Yahweh; do not resent his rebuke, for Yahweh reproves the man he loves as a father checks a well-loved son' (Prov 3,11-12). The theme is resumed in the Letter to the Hebrews and in Paul: 'The Lord punishes the one he loves: he whips the one whom he accepts' (Heb 12,6). 'When the Lord does punish us, it is to correct us and to stop us being condemned with the world' (1 Cor 11,37). But such suffering will not be beyond our capacity to endure. 'You can trust God not to let you be tried beyond your strength, and with any trial he will give you the way out and the strength to bear it' (1 Cor 10,13). The pauline view, therefore, is that suffering can be imposed by God as formative training, but such punishment will never become intolerable.

The second reason offered by scripture for the existence of suffering is more mysterious and profound. Suffering if shouldered willingly lightens the burden of others. Christ's role is foreshadowed by the prophecy of the suffering servant in Isaiah: 'Ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrow he carried. *But we thought of him as someone punished, struck by God and brought low.* Yet he was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins. . . . On him lies a punishment that brings us peace, and through his wounds we are healed' (Isai 53,3-5). Christ himself came 'to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk 10,45), and his followers must aspire to the

same role (Mk 8,34-35). We identify ourselves with Christ by being willing to share his sufferings undertaken to redeem all men; this service undertaken for others will entail sacrifice and perhaps death itself. 'If you refuse to love, you must remain dead. . . . This has taught us love, that he gave up his life for us; and we too ought to give up our lives for our brothers' (1 Jn 3,15-16).[1]

These are the main strands of the 'deductive' teaching of scripture on suffering: that it is an inevitable part of man's condition, that it can be used by God to school us, that it will not be intolerable, and that if shouldered willingly it relieves in a mystical way the sufferings of others. The Fathers constantly stress that we are not to challenge or resent its presence, which we must attribute to the incomprehensible nature of divine wisdom.[2] Many of us who confront this problem from within the frontiers of christian adhesion know of people like Mary Craig[3] who have had the strength to live out the implications of the biblical teaching. In her case one can virtually draw the map of how shouldered suffering can bring relief to others, for the painful acceptance of her own handicapped children led her into dynamic participation of the work of the Sue Ryder homes. The profundity of the biblical teaching clearly offers sufficient inspiration and strength for exemplary characters like these.

Inevitably, however, the fact that many Christians have experienced peace of mind and acceptance of the biblical precepts will seem to some enquirers to beg the question. They will reasonably say that what works for some may not — apparently does not — work for others. More fundamentally they will insist that such precepts should not fly in the face of rational analysis, that we should use our God-given reason to ask God 'What is it that you say?'

The first and most basic contribution which reason makes is to distinguish between the sufferings which are the norm of human life (toothache or indigestion, anxiety about teenagers' whereabouts, breakdown through overwork and the like) and those which are intense and protracted. The former are a necessary part of a rational world; they regulate behaviour, signal the need for medical treatment, and enhance the joys of human living by their absence. It is surely this category of less intense suffering of which Paul thinks when he envisages God punishing us as a father punishes his sons (Heb 12,6-9).

Such intense and protracted sufferings as being maimed by a typhoon, suffering starvation through drought, or the degree of anguish which destroys the human personality cannot be considered

in the same light. Though the line may be sometimes difficult to draw, we have to maintain that objectively such experiences are an evil, and that accordingly God cannot be the author of them. He may countenance them, as in the case of Job, but he cannot originate them. This fundamental principle can serve as an important corrective to mistaken interpretations of the 'deductive' teaching. We have probably all heard sermons which have sought to glorify such suffering as an objective good; but reason cries out that a God who is loving and good cannot have willed such things. It seems blasphemy to suggest that the children dying of starvation in Uganda, or the blinded old lady in the hospital-bed, are being punished by the christian God.

As all know, Augustine wrestled with this problem for half his thinking life before finally adopting the Neoplatonist solution that evil must be that corruption which is the privation of good.[4] However heartless it may sound, the rational perspective offers insights which help to make the witnessing of even hideous sufferings less intolerable. Such pains are to be visualized as aberrations or deficiencies in the proper order of the world, and not as integral to the grand design of creation. It is at this point that the Christian must have recourse to the myth of Adam's fall — that radical misdirection of the human will which we call original sin.

It is much easier for the enquirer of our generation to concede the fundamental flaw at the heart of mankind than was the case fifty or sixty years ago. The history of Buchenwald and Hiroshima has left its mark on much of the significant fiction of our day. Those who have read Saul Bellow's *Mr Sammler's Planet* will recognize the novel as a parable of our times. Arthur Sammler, a Polish Jew from Cracow, had lived for several years in London on nodding terms with H. G. Wells, and had thus become attuned to the scientific humanism which optimistically visualized the world as the oyster of *homo sapiens*. Then by a dreadful irony he returns to Poland, to be imprisoned in a concentration camp from which he escapes only by murdering his german guard. Living with jewish relatives in New York, he casts his one sound eye over the anarchy of New York society: the pickpocketing, the violence, the obsessive preoccupation with sex, the avarice of near relatives. And as he sits over the treatises of Meister Eckhart, he contemplates the possibility of a fresh start for man on the moon. This is the kind of candid camera which encourages the theologian to preach the myth of original sin; man fell by desiring to decree good and evil for himself, and redemption

is the only remedy for this canker in the human race. We are 'chronically ill patients',[5] and the suffering which we experience is a part of our condition of alienation from God.

Two consequences follow from this flawed condition. First, our bodies are overtaken by a progressive material corruption and by death. All the sufferings concomitant with the gradual process of dying (even including such harrowing examples as the old lady overcome with blindness) are acceptable to the reason as a consequence of our being human. Secondly, we are vitiated not merely by material corruption but also by moral corruption. Much of the suffering in the world is inflicted by ourselves upon ourselves or upon each other. But it is not merely a matter of our own sins and omissions catching up with us, nor a matter of innocents (like Jacqueline Hill) becoming victims of a neighbour's spite. Our sins in this generation attack or handicap those who succeed us, just as the sins of the fathers (the phrase inevitably recalls the tragedy of Ulster) rebound on us.

It is therefore rational to accept the existence of many forms of suffering as the consequence of our corrupted material and moral nature. But we cannot claim that there is any visible logic in the allocation of suffering to particular individuals. Divine scripture claims that God punishes those whom he loves, but many of the Fathers are in no doubt that there is no apparent consistency in the trials which individuals undergo. 'Not only are good men found in evil fortune and evil men in good fortune, which seems unjust', says Augustine, 'but in many cases evil men experience evil fortune and good men good fortune, so that the judgments of God become even more inscrutable, and his ways more unsearchable': Augustine concludes that what good and evil men share — the blessings and sufferings of this world — are not to be accounted important.[6]

To the eye of reason, then, immoderate and protracted suffering may strike at random; but can its very existence in the world be justified? It is possible to argue that such suffering, even if apparently undeserved, is 'inevitable in the best possible world'.[7] A world which is to enable man to achieve the highest realization of his potential must contain within it trials and hazards to be overcome; moreover there must exist in that world fixed laws to allow men full play to act as free moral agents. As Peter Geach remarks, such virtues as those of Thomas More or Maksymilian Kolbe could never have emerged except in a world where extreme villainy was permitted to exist.

The 'best possible world' must have not only fixed moral laws but also fixed physical laws to allow man to achieve his full potential of inventive genius. Perhaps the most memorable literary expression of this basic truth is (in John Dryden's famous formula) 'the best poem of the best poet', the *Georgics* of Virgil. Here is presented a powerful picture of a planned and ordered world in which the divine dispensation sets before men a series of trials and difficulties which he has been given the mental and material equipment to overcome. Has it not become the cliché of our century that man can tread the moon, but has failed dismally to feed the starving? Is not the solution to the hazards of typhoons in the Caribbean, earthquakes in Algeria and Italy, and drought in Uganda precisely the application of human intelligence, hard work, vigilance — all combined with a sense of community and piety — such as Virgil proposed? And the reward would be a world of plenty, of which the 'glorification of Italy' in the *Georgics* presents such a splendid poetic vision. This awareness of the beneficence of God's creation, which appears to require nothing more from men than sustained ingenuity and effort in order to create a paradise, has led poetic thinkers from Isaiah to Teilhard to foresee an earth of blessedness; we need not succumb to this seductive 'millenarist' prospect to accept that man has been endowed with the capacity to master his environment and to obliterate the hazards of typhoons, earthquakes and droughts if only he is willing to apply himself to the problems which should concern him. The divine dispensation has left a world of fixed physical laws for man to exploit for the good of his species, and the responsibility for failure is man's, not God's.

For many Christians, however, this is too chilling a vision, with its overtones of the 'death of God' thesis, or the sense of an epicurean divinity who leaves man to his own devices. Christians cannot subscribe to the notion of a frigid god who ignores the cries of the weak, the poor, the distressed. Our God is the God of the psalms, 'who hears the cry of the poor' (Ps 33,7), the defender of widows and orphans (Ps 67,5). Our God cannot contemplate with equanimity the starving child in Uganda or the Vietnamese crippled by a russian or an american bomb. The noble notion of man grappling with the difficulties of his environment and aspiring to full moral and spiritual maturity has to be complemented with the vision of an all-compassionate Father who knows our limitations and sustains us in our trials. We are not mere cyphers in a grand cosmic development, but set on earth for the love, knowledge and service of God.

It is therefore reasonable to infer that a balance will be struck between what we bear in this life and what we experience in the life to come, that those who suffer grievously here will have their compensation in heaven. This is a theme which recurs repeatedly in the fathers. Augustine states that since death itself is the outcome of our first parents' sinning, it is an evil which we must endure. 'Whatever it is which deprives dying people of their senses and causes deep distress, increases the merit of their patience if it is endured in a devoted and faithful way. . . . Since death is man's repayment for sin, it sometimes obtains for him exemption from the future repayment for sin'.[8] John Chrysostom asks: 'How did sickness, sores, poverty and the absence of men to tend him harm Lazarus? Was it not through these hardships that he won more splendid crowns to wear?'[9] The parable of Dives and Lazarus, the distillation of the scriptural teaching that there will be a just balance between our experiences in this world and in the next, haunted the consciousness of many of the fathers of the Church, as it did of Paul (cf Rom 8,18).

We may summarize the arguments from reason in this way. Intense and protracted suffering is an evil; God cannot be the author of it. Such suffering is an aberration in the order of the world which God did not will; it is the result of our flawed humanity. The material decay in our bodies entails suffering in the course of nature. The moral flaw or canker within us causes us to inflict suffering upon ourselves, or upon our neighbour, or upon generations still to come. But beyond these self-inflicted pains lie sufferings for which man cannot be made directly responsible; but he has been granted the intellectual, physical and material means by which to cope with these hazards. Many of the calamities which we suffer are the outcome of his failure to use these resources. Even so, the loving Father does not remain indifferent to the sufferings which as individuals men must endure with no logical pattern or allocation; the notion of justice suggests that those who suffer harshly here will be compensated in heaven.

It is clear that however manfully we try to reconcile these 'inductive' arguments with the 'deductive' biblical teachings, there remains much which we cannot explain or begin to understand. The pauline verses which must always be at the forefront of the Christian's mind, 'How incomprehensible are his judgments, and how unsearchable his way! For who hath known the mind of the Lord, or who hath been his counsellor?' (Rom 11,33-34), are in fact

the culminating argument which the reason must accept. Man's finite mind cannot plumb the depths or heights of the infinite mystery. There is a twelfth-century allegorical poem, the *Anticlaudianus* of Alan of Lille, in which human wisdom mounts to heaven in a space-craft drawn by the five senses, and steered by reason; reason can take her only to the limits of the firmament, and theology conducts her onwards towards heaven. But even under theology's guidance, wisdom is blinded by what she sees; faith has to be summoned to revive her, and to lead her onward into the presence of God the Father. The reason must acknowledge and be content with her own partial vision, admitting with Job that man cannot comprehend the ways of God.

Scholastic argument rarely survives the shattering impact of emotional experience. It happened that while I was gathering my thoughts for this paper with the deadline looming, I was invited to talk to a local discussion-group, and I cold-bloodedly chose this subject to clarify the pattern of the argument. The man who had to give the vote of thanks almost broke down; I was told afterwards that the week before his small niece had fallen from a balcony and killed herself, and that he had spent the week trying to console her mother. I went away cursing the glibness with which I had rehearsed the arguments for human responsibility for suffering, for the need for suffering in the best possible world; the glibness with which I had spoken of the faith which enables us to believe that God 'orders all things sweetly'. In such circumstances it must be enough to ask: 'what is it that you say?'

NOTES

[1] There is a good analysis of this 'deductive' teaching by M. Tripole, 'Suffering and Christian Growth', in *Supplement to The Way*, 39 (1980), pp 35ff.

[2] John Chrysostom, *De providentia*, 12 (*Sources chrétiennes*, vol 79).

[3] See her moving book, *Blessings* (London, 1978).

[4] See especially, *Confessions* 7,3-16.

[5] I take the phrase from Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge, 1977).

[6] *City of God*, 20,2.

[7] See C. A. Campbell, 'Reason and the Problem of Suffering', in *Philosophy* 10 (1935), pp 154ff; John Collins, 'C. A. Campbell and the Problem of Suffering', in *Religious Studies*, 16 (1980), pp 307ff.

[8] *City of God*, 13,6.

[9] John Chrysostom, *Quod nemo laeditur*, 4 (*Sources Chrétiennes*, vol 103).